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Hunger Without Borders: The Humanitarian Crisis Spilling from Sudan into South Sudan

Key Messages

- Since the escalation of the conflict in Sudan in April 2023, **over 1.2 million people have crossed from Sudan into South Sudan**, including around 800 000 South Sudanese returnees.
- The majority is **settling in already fragile areas** like Upper Nile State, where conflict and insecurity are driving over 32 500 people into catastrophic levels of food insecurity.
- **The highest concentration of returnees is in Luakpiny/Nasir County in Upper Nile State, where there is a Risk of Famine.**
- Despite the challenging conditions in South Sudan, people continue to arrive from Sudan in search of safety and humanitarian aid.
- Conflict-driven displacement from Sudan is contributing to catastrophic hunger in South Sudan. By July 2025, **nearly 50 percent of people classified in IPC Phase 5 (Catastrophe) in South Sudan are returnees**, highlighting their unique vulnerabilities compared to the resident population.

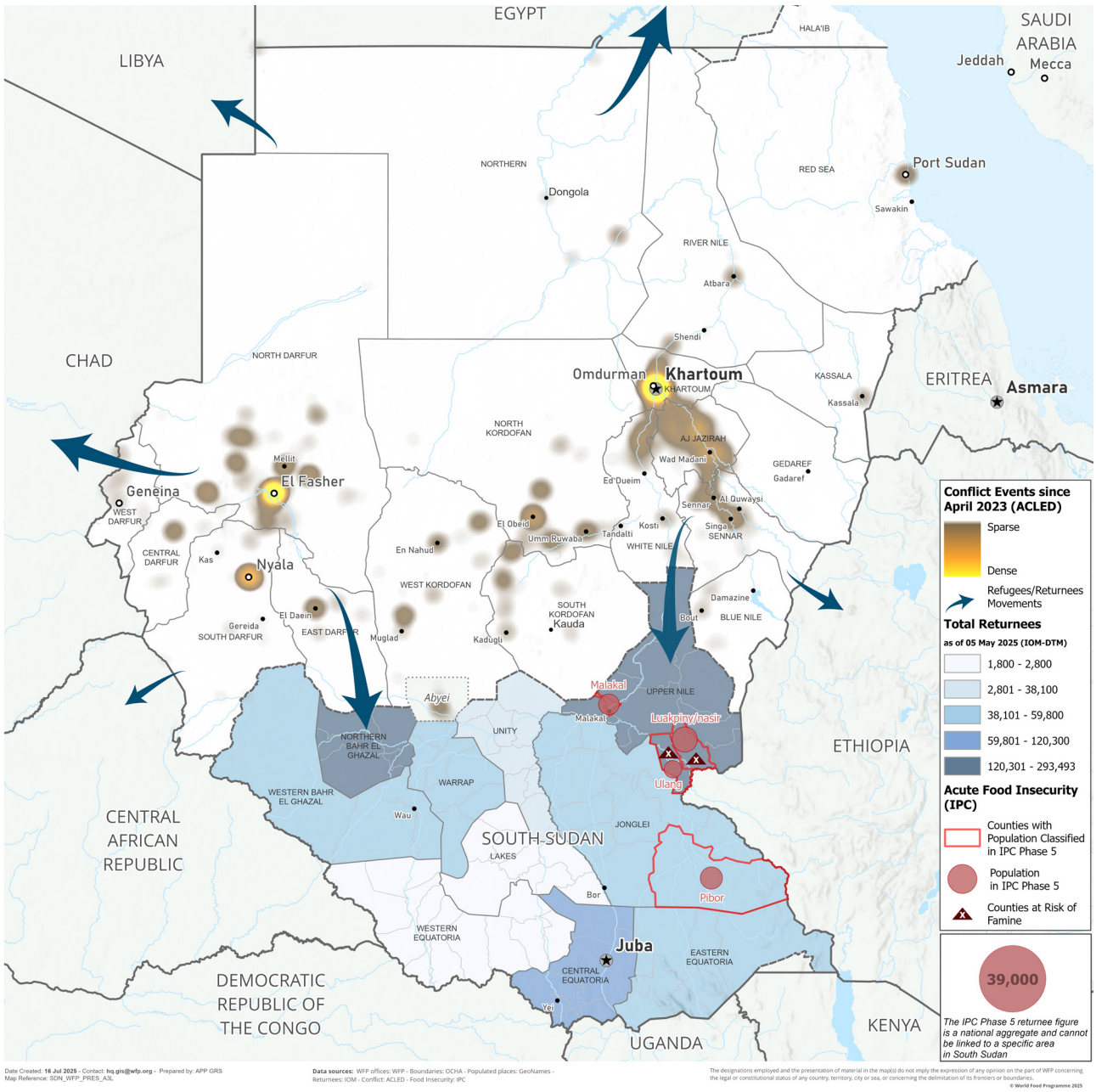
July 2025

Overview

The 2025 Global Report on Food Crises outlined how most of the world's forcibly displaced people are concentrated in countries and territories with food crises. Additionally, data reveal a clear and consistent tendency: the prevalence of acute food insecurity is higher among displaced populations and returnees compared to residents, implying unique vulnerabilities and challenges faced by displaced populations.[i]

This analysis focuses on the conflict-driven arrivals from Sudan in South Sudan and explores the link between displacement and Catastrophic conditions of food insecurity (IPC Phase 5)[1] among returnees and residents living in areas where displaced populations are mostly concentrated. Acute food insecurity among refugees is not discussed in this analysis as IPC analyses do not disaggregate data for refugees.

Figure 1: Conflict events, population movements, and IPC Phase 5



Data source: ACLED, UNHCR, IOM DTM,[2] IPC data.

Displacement Context and Impact of the Sudan Crisis

The escalating conflict in Sudan since April 2023 has triggered one of the world's fastest-growing displacement crises. By mid-June 2025, the number of people forcibly displaced reached a staggering 12 million, including 7.7 million IDPs and 4 million people fleeing to neighbouring countries.[ii]

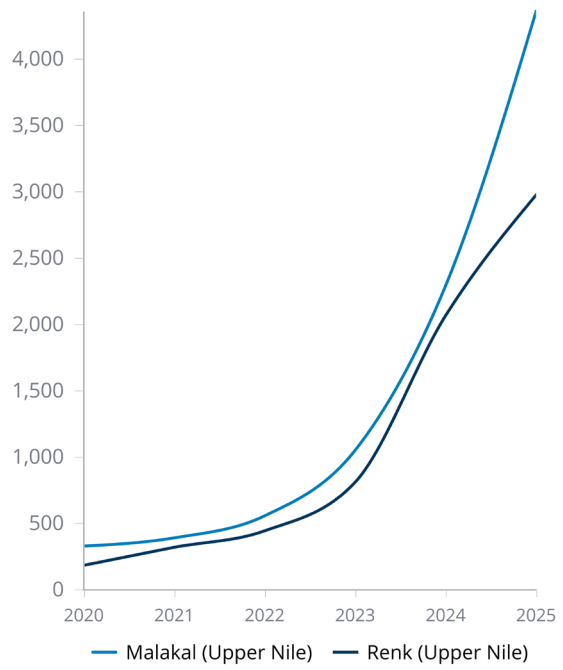
Since April 2023, conflict events in Sudan have been mostly concentrated in Khartoum, North Darfour, and South Darfour.[iii] This triggered population movements internally in Sudan and to neighbouring countries, primarily to Egypt, South Sudan, and Chad, that so far received respectively 1.5 million, 1.2 million, and 864 000 refugees.[iv] While Egypt remains a preferred destination for Sudanese with the financial means or documentation to travel, the most vulnerable - those fleeing on foot, without resources or identification - are overwhelmingly crossing into South Sudan and Chad, often as a last resort and with only minimal belongings.[v]

Across the border, increasing flows of people seeking refuge and safety from violence and escaping hunger are compounding humanitarian needs, exacerbating already dire conditions. Crucially, Sudan's neighbouring countries, including South Sudan, are already grappling with ongoing conflict, food insecurity, and climate shocks, leaving them ill-equipped to absorb large-scale inflows.[vi]

The 1.2 million people fleeing into South Sudan includes nearly 400 000 Sudanese refugees and around 800 000 South Sudanese returnees.[vii] According to data from the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, most returnee movements between 2023 and 2024 were driven by the national conflict in Sudan. The largest share of returnees originated from Khartoum, one of the most affected areas in terms conflict events, and arrivals in South Sudan have been heavily concentrated in Upper Nile State, that became the epicentre of the returnee crisis *(see Figure 1)*.[viii,ix]

Furthermore, the conflict in Sudan has negatively impacted the economy of South Sudan. Oil flows through Sudan have been disrupted, leading to a significant reduction in oil export revenues, which account for over 90 percent of the country's national income. As of March 2025, South Sudan recorded the highest currency depreciation in the East Africa region, and a 309 percent year-on-year increase in the domestic price of crude oil. States bordering Sudan are particularly affected as they rely on imports of food and fuel from Sudan, especially during the rainy season.[x] Trade flow disruptions have already led to significant price increases, with basic food basket costs surging by more than 600 percent in South Sudan since the onset of the conflict in Sudan.[xi] In May 2025, the national average prices for key cereals were 200 percent above the level of last year and 500 percent above the five-year average *(see Figure 2)*.[xii]

Figure 2: Average price in SSP of white sorghum (kg) in Renk and Malakal



Data source: WFP South Sudan Country Office July 2025.

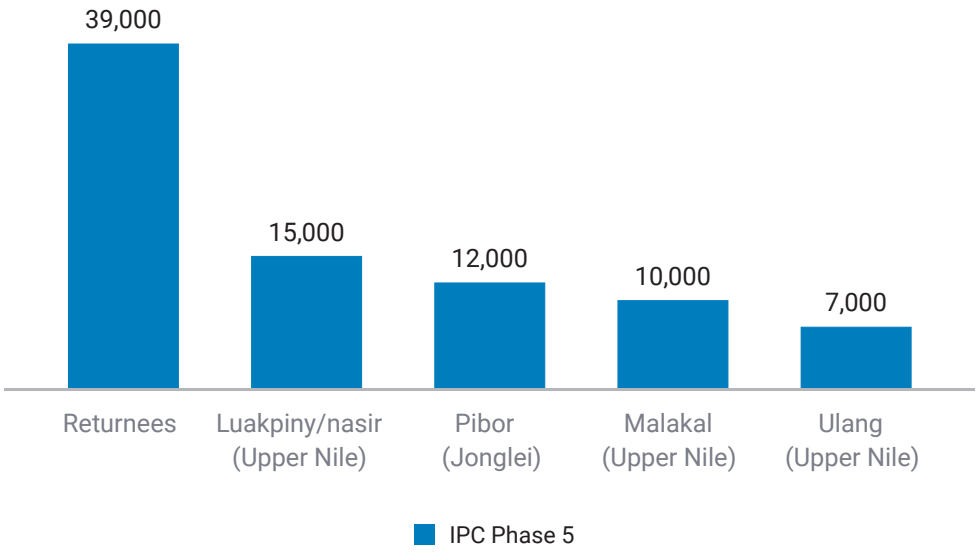
Catastrophic levels of acute food insecurity in South Sudan

The latest IPC analysis conducted in South Sudan presents pockets of the population facing Catastrophic levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 5), concentrated among returnees and in displacement hotspots in Upper Nile State - namely Luakpiny/Nasir and Ulang counties, where there is also a risk of Famine.[xiii]

Among the 83 000 people classified in Phase 5 by July 2025, 39 000 are returnees, representing nearly 50 percent of the total Phase 5 population in country *(see Figure 3)*.[xiv]

Since the escalation of the conflict in Sudan in April 2023, the influx of returnees in South Sudan has been steadily increasing. Along with it, also the number of returnees being classified in Catastrophe (IPC Phase 5) has increased - 28 000 returnees in April to July 2024, 31 000 returnees in April to July 2025, and nearly 40 000 returnees in the April to July 2025 update, against a total of 44 000 non-returnees *(see Figure 4)*.[xv]

Figure 3: Populations in IPC Phase 5 between April and July 2025 [3]

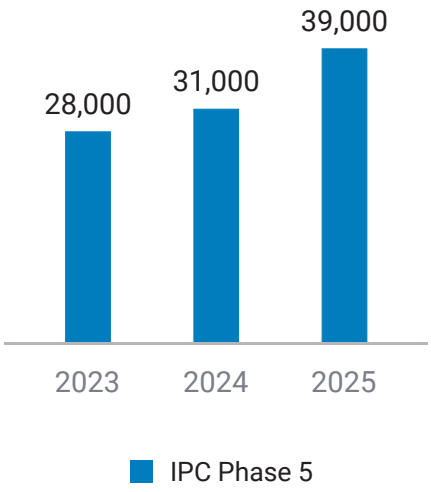


Data source: IPC South Sudan.

Moreover, data shows that between April and July 2025, 85 percent of people returning to South Sudan after fleeing the conflict in Sudan are likely to face higher levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above) compared to the resident population *(see Figure 5)*. This demonstrates the severe underlying vulnerabilities of returnees compared to the resident population, that include difficulties in accessing land for cultivation and ownership of livestock, coupled with severe economic vulnerability in the country of arrival.

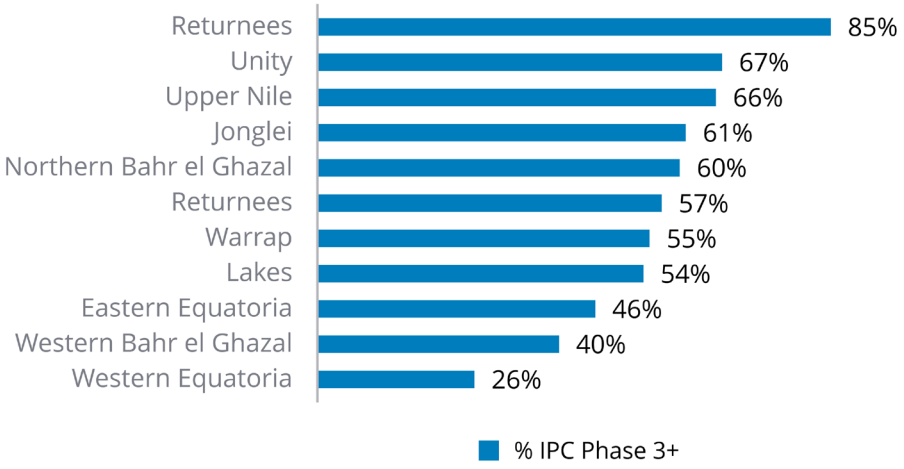
As a result, returnees rely primarily on humanitarian assistance, daily casual labour, and sale of timber and forest products. However, many households are under-employed with limited opportunities for application of skills and capacities; in addition, the influx of displaced populations has depressed

Figure 4: Returnee population facing IPC Phase 5 between 2023 and 2025 analyses [4]



Data source: IPC South Sudan.

Figure 5: % of IPC Phase 3 or above between April and July 2025



Data source: IPC South Sudan June 2025.

the wage rates for casual and daily labour.[xvi] This environment drives widespread dependence on humanitarian aid, which, in the current funding situation, is stretched thin across both displaced and host populations. Coverage of humanitarian assistance remains quite low for returnees living in host communities and in camps, while it has significantly increased since the escalation of the conflict for returnees and refugees in transit centres.[xvii]

Returnees in South Sudan face a wide range of challenges beyond food insecurity. Inter-communal violence, such as attacks, looting, and threats, is frequently reported, especially in overcrowded transit sites and informal settlements.[xviii] Many return to find their land and homes occupied or destroyed, leaving them in makeshift shelters, with limited ways to reclaim land due to weak legal systems and lack of documents.[xix] Access to healthcare is extremely limited, and poor water and sanitation systems contribute to disease outbreaks like cholera, particularly in Upper Nile State and transit centres.[xx] The lack of identity documentation further restricts access to services and aid.[xxi] Many households are reluctant to move to their place of origin due to protection concerns, stemming from past conflict-related trauma and current or anticipated flooding. Returnees and refugees from urban centres like Khartoum also worry about limited livelihood opportunities in rural areas.[xxii]

Paradoxically, the number of arrivals has increased over the years even as conditions in South Sudan continue deteriorating significantly. While humanitarian food assistance is reaching some of the most vulnerable populations, funding cuts and access constraints continue posing challenges to the delivery of sufficient humanitarian aid.[xxiii] As a result, many displaced people are forced to move not to where they feel safest, but to areas where they have the greatest chance of accessing even minimal assistance often locations already facing Catastrophic food insecurity (IPC Phase 5). This underscores a critical gap - in the humanitarian response: the need to ensure that the limited aid available is not only sufficiently but also equitably distributed, so that displaced populations are not forced to choose between safety and survival.

Adding to this complexity, since late February 2025, political instability and rising hostilities between armed groups in South Sudan have led to new clashes, particularly in Upper Nile State. This has caused a large influx of returnees fleeing South Sudan back into Sudan; since April 2025, more than 67 000 Sudanese, who had previously fled the conflict in Sudan, have been returning to Blue Nile State in Sudan. Sudanese returnees have cited insecurity, and prolonged lack of food assistance and essential services in South Sudanese camps as key reasons.[xxiv]

Conclusion

The Sudan–South Sudan crisis starkly illustrates how conflict-driven displacement fuels catastrophic hunger. The mass influx of returnees and refugees into already food insecure areas in South Sudan has overwhelmed local coping capacities and humanitarian systems. With funding cuts and inadequate humanitarian assistance available, populations are forced to move to where they have the greatest chance of survival, rather than receive assistance where they feel safest.

This reality highlights a critical gap in the humanitarian response: the need for urgent, sustained, and equitable aid that supports not only displaced populations but also the host communities absorbing them. Special attention must be given to returnees, who face distinct challenges such as lack of documentation, limited access to land, and heightened protection risks.

To prevent further deterioration, regular monitoring of food security and malnutrition outcomes is essential. Humanitarian actors and policymakers must act decisively to ensure that assistance reaches those most in need - before survival becomes a matter of chance rather than choice.

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1 The IPC (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification) is a multi-stakeholder, consensus-based process that results in a classification of the magnitude and severity of acute food insecurity based on a convergence of evidence that are comparable across countries. It classifies populations in five different phases according to the severity of the food insecurity and malnutrition situation: (1) Minimal, (2) Stressed, (3) Crisis, (4) Emergency, and (5) Catastrophe/Famine. IPC Phase 5 (Catastrophe / Famine) means that households have an extreme lack of food and/or other basic needs even after full employment of coping strategies. Starvation, death, destitution and extremely critical acute malnutrition levels are evident. For Famine classification, area needs to have extreme critical levels of acute malnutrition and mortality.

2 The IOM DTM returnee figure considers only displaced South Sudanese who returned home from abroad, and cannot be compared with the spontaneous refugee returnees reported by UNHCR, which also includes those who returned from Sudan but relocated somewhere else.

3 Data covers the 2025 lean season from April to July 2025 with a risk of Famine in Luakpiny/Nasir and Ulang counties. Returnees are considered as a separate stratum and are not accounted for in the other areas analysed.

4 IPC developed a separate stratum for returnees from the 2023 analysis as a response to the Sudan crisis, therefore a comparison with previous years is not possible. The data presented covers the second projected period of each analysis, coinciding with the lean season April to July of the year following the date of analysis.

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Endnotes

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